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THE AESTHETICS OF MARGINALITY IN TONI MORRISON'S "BELOVED"

Dr SANGEETA KAINTE

Department of English, Govt. Degree college, Thatyur Uttarakhand, India



ABSTRACT

Toni Morrison (born on 18th February 1931) Nobel Laureate and prolific writer of the African American community has successfully build a new approach for the literature of the marginalized community. It is not mere documentation of the oppression of the Black community but a well structured, aesthetically appealing frame that explores the new arenas of Black Literature.

The sense of claiming 'self' and a never ending process of attaining ones identity is the major emotional turmoil for almost all members of the clan of the Black society. The oppression by the so called 'fairer' community and the struggle from slavery form the basic theme of Black literature.

The present paper aims at pointing out the magic that Toni Morrison has created in her best seller novel, *Beloved* (1987). The novel set in the root of slavery salutes to the spirit of a mother who chooses to be a recluse than to submit to the evils of slavery. The marginalized Black women and her struggle for literature is beautifully intensified by the novelist that touches our soul.

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'Literature of Marginalized' is the term used for literature written by a minority class residing within a nation but distinguished from the other privileged classes in terms of lifestyle and the basic rights, thus, causing the uneven status, feeling of inferiority complex and exploitation of the underprivileged ones. With the revolutionary theories such as Marxism, Post-colonialism etc coming into existence, literature has acquired the title of propagator. Today this genre of literature is flourishing as a separate branch of literature where it is often stated that its aesthetic values lies in the political strives within the communities. The aesthetics of the marginalized writers in not only the matter of art and its abstract features but it is essential for survival. The inspiration for such works is the real life experience of the subjugated classes who struggle along with the members of the

community to benefit the basic needs of life – sense of identity, freedom and feeding.

African-American literature is the literature produced in United States by the writers of African origin. The genre traces its origins to the works of such late 18th century where the focus was only on the issues of slavery. But today it deals with variety of theme such as economy, politics, Black Nationalism, racist attitude of America and also the female perspectives in the Black society. The works of these writers always keep their experiences as the background of their work to provide intensity of emotions. This expresses their inner need to develop an original style for their unique experiences.

The major purpose behind writing for these marginalized classes is the claim to create self. The 'self' that is lost under the double oppression of

racism and capitalism. The literature in this phase has been more of self revealing and moves like a journey towards the search for identity. It is not concerned with any usefulness or morality. It is merely a record of survival of these neglected classes casting not a single character but giving the collective voice to that

character. No story is individual in nature; every character represents the community and its proceedings. Literature provides the medium where these subjugated people can present their problems before the other liberated classes.

Toni Morrison recreated the history of slavery in 1987 with the publication of her fifth novel *Beloved* which grabbed the prestigious award of Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. She came out with a story which made the reader relive the traumatic experiences of the slave age. *Beloved* is based on a real life incident of a slave woman, Margaret Garner, who attempts to escape the bondage of slavery with her children but finding no hope of freedom she attempts to kill her children and succeeds in killing one of her daughters by slashing her throat with a butcher knife. The act was her resistance towards the entire system of slavery. The story of *Beloved* is based on the same lines where the mother becomes the killer of her own blood. Sethe, the character inspired by her real life counterpart, is a black slave who dares to think beyond the spaces provided for Blacks and dreams of a better future for her own children. Herself being the victim of slavery she is reluctant to see her daughter in the same place and therefore attempts the most unnatural act of killing her daughter, Beloved. But her guilt haunts her all life long as Beloved appears as a girl in flesh to revenge her death. With the dead daughter coming to life, Sethe is haunted by the guilt of her past. Beloved, torments Sethe almost to death till the community comes to rescue the mother. The story unfolds with the series of flashbacks initiated by the conversation of Sethe and Paul D, another victim of slavery. Morrison gives the detail account of the mistreatment suffered by the blacks during the era of slavery and its harsh consequences even after the slave age.

The common characteristic between Dalit and African American genre of literature is pain of

segregation. The characters are isolated and discriminated on the basis of caste, color, occupation and gender. This sense of isolation leads to disastrous consequences. Sethe and all other Black characters in the novel are treated no better than animals. Sethe is treasured only for her reproducing qualities so that she could produce generations of slaves to enhance the economy of the whites. They are assigned the most degraded tasks at the owners place. The slaves were deprived of forming a family and their young ones were traded as a material of utility. Sethe was robbed of her identity, her freedom and above all she was robbed of her maternal milk. The white schoolteacher and his nephews made the psychological assault on Sethe when they milked her like a cow. The incident resulted in the act of violence where the poor mother kills her daughter to save her from the evils of slavery.

Toni Morrison has a conscience towards the reality and this makes "... poverty, slavery, oppression immediate even to those readers who have never experienced them, even to those readers who would choose to forget" (Rigney 77). She has brought the true picture of the African American setup where black men and women were rented, mortgaged, bought, sold and even stolen. They were moved like "checkers" (Morrison 29). The human values were neglected and they were exploited till every drop of their black blood was utilized by the slave owner. Death for the oppressed class, "... was anything but forgetfulness" (4). It was the only solution to the agonies of their present birth. For Sethe it was the only way out. "Why I did it. How if I hadn't killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her" (200). She clarifies that she, "... took her babies where they'd be safe" (201). The statement itself reveals the horror of being a second class citizen of a country. Toni Morrison has presented a deep insight to the terrible consequences of slavery. The humiliation comes in various forms to the oppressed class. It is physical for some characters and psychological for the others. If we go back and turn the pages of Black tradition, males were always oppressive in dealing with black females but *Beloved* unfolds the plight of black males as well as black

females in the African American setup. For Sethe the milk stealing act becomes the horror of slavery and its psychological effect is seen in her decision of killing her own daughter. Her husband Halle Suggs turns mad. Paul D is the only character whose sufferings are described by the writer in detail. "Paul D's story is like a case history of how far the degradation of slave could go" (Carmean 92). He symbolizes the sufferings of entire black class under the institution of slavery. The dehumanized treatment of Paul D crosses the limits of physical torment one can inflict. He is beaten like an animal and his tongue held down by iron where, "... the need to spit is so deep you cry for it" (87).

Resistance towards the racial segregation has caused these oppressed classes to develop into a rebel. Sethe is declared an outcast and imprisoned for the act of violence. But the infanticide she committed was not out of will but it was her reluctance towards the oppressors. The circumstances made her hard hearted and she preferred to send her daughter to an unknown world rather than returning to her slave masters. Similar resistance is seen in the character of Sethe's mother who throws all her babies born out of whites. The sufferance of the Black community is depicted in the words of Sethe's mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, where she declares that "... there is no bad luck in the world but white folks" (109).

Community plays the vital role in shaping the characters in the novel. *Beloved* is the story which hits on the tension between the community and the individual. "In *Beloved* life is hell, but togetherness, shared experiences, and brotherly/sisterly love help the characters to survive, if not to forge better lives for themselves"(Mbalia 91). There is a unique style of writing of these writers, that is, the 'call and response technique'. In this style the community responds when called for help forgetting all grudges and holding the feeling of solidarity above all. It also points the communal nature of the text.

In the chronicles of human history, no other group has ever suffered from such a socio-economic, physical, cultural and sexual torment and agonies like the African-American women and the Dalit women of India. Both are victims of the triple

jeopardy of racism, sexism and classism. In literature they have been portrayed as a being without voice or self. Sethe is forced to submit herself to her white masters besides all mean tasks she has to perform as a slave. She is transported as an object to one place to another. Motherhood is precious to every woman. But Sethe was denied of her motherhood. She was not allowed to nurse her daughter with her milk. In fact she was beaten brutally when she was pregnant with her fourth child. The slave women were never designated as mothers. "Their infant children could be sold away from them like calves from cows" (Davis 7). Exploitation is not only from the whites, it is more from the black male counterpart. Therefore a black female becomes, "... the slave of the slave" (Ranveer 11). The community also tagged the black female as loose and immoral. Even the black males view her with the eyes of the white masters. Even after slavery came to the end in America, there is continued harassment of the black women. She has not gained her actual position due to her origin and color.

One of the major reasons for the domination of the blacks by the whites is by the existing standard of beauty: blue eyes, blond hair and fair skin. This concept of ideal beauty created a "zero image" (Wilfred 10). This shame affects the lives of the slave women and it leads to self hatred and eventually destruction. When Morrison came out with her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970) she clarified that she wrote the novel because she wanted to read such a story. The idea was clear that the plight of African American women was not represented correctly in American literature. Similarly the hardships of Dalit women had no space in the works written by the males. Therefore, the females started writing their history on their own to reclaim their lost womanhood and self. "Slavery is terrible for men, but it is far more terrible for women; super added to the burden common to all, they have wrongs, and suffering and mortification peculiar to their own" (Brent 405). *Beloved* is prominently a story of a black female slave who is forced to consider her sub-human status on the Sweet Home Plantation where she worked as a slave which ultimately awakens her to search for her own self in the bondage as well as freedom. But the self

realization of Sethe is at the painful cost of killing her own daughter.

Silence is another artistic technique used in the discourse of female characters in the novel. Sethe accepts silence as the only ailment to the hardships of life. Her act of infanticide was not accompanied by words. Without any word she accepts the fate and moves to the prison. She never voiced the haunting memories of her past to her younger daughter Denver. She along with Baby Suggs, "... had agreed without saying so that [the past] was unspeakable" (72). The silence was acceptable as the circumstances behind it were common to all the members of the community. It was more a question of understanding.

The harassment that slavery brought was not just limited to physical abuses; it deeply affected the psychological state of the Blacks. Therefore, the major quality of the Black writing has been its complexity arising out of the amalgam of the psychological and the supernatural. Morrison enhances this complexity by the use of African folklores in her story. *Beloved* on one hand appears to be a ghost story and on the other it deals with the psychology of a perplexed mind of a slave. The boundary between these two regions is blurred. Morrison's *Beloved*, "... penetrates perhaps more deeply than any historic or psychological study could, the unconscious emotional and psychic consequences of slavery" (Schapiro 194). The appearance of *Beloved* is mysterious for the community but for Sethe she is her dead daughter. The pain of the physical assaults may have diminished for Sethe but the permanent scar of disgust is still visible in the feelings she has for the white society. In Sethe words the whites:

...could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forget who you were and couldn't think it up. (308)

Morrison follows a circling or repetition around the traumatic events. The idea is to develop the picture of sufferance that the oppressors and even the oppressed prefer to ignore. The literature of marginalization always has inspiration in the past.

Morrison also presents a view that past should not be forgotten. It should be accepted and understood to free oneself from the feeling of guilt or remorse. The character of *Beloved* is the embodiment of the past. She symbolizes Sethe's guilt and haunts her till she comes over it with the help of the community. *Beloved* serves as the mirror character which reveals the repressed feelings of the characters that come in contact with her. Sethe is reminded of the infanticide that she committed, Paul D of his horrific past of slavery and the community is reminded of its failure to warn Sethe on the arrival of the slave owners. The story of *Beloved* is not linear but circular. It revolves around the incident of the infanticide and within it unfolds the slave narratives. The plot is revealed by the flashbacks of Sethe and Paul D. The flashback technique re-examines the life which these slaves had in the period of their bondage. It is only by the acceptance of the past that Sethe discovers herself in the end.

Besides the natural factors of origin or birth, economic reasons are also responsible for the poor conditions of the subjugated classes. Since education had negligible role amongst these classes they were also exploited economically. The slaves underestimated their worth in the society and therefore never aimed at better job opportunities. Morrison has also hinted this in her novel. She has also provided a solution through the character of Stamp Paid and Ella, another ex-slave couple, that feeling of collectivism is important to overcome the financial crises. The couple makes it a point to help every Black in need with money, food, cloths or any other type of help to spread an even distribution of wealth and resources. The message of brotherhood and equality is prominent in the works of many Black writers.

The common charge labeled across the literature of the minority group is that is their work lacks the aesthetic value as it written for a social purpose and entertains only a particular section of the society. It is also argued that such literature is used only for propagation. However the list of best sellers from the minority groups refutes this claim. Toni Morrison, the recipient of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1993, proves the universal appeal of Black Literature. The real beauty of these marginal

writers lies in the honesty of their emotions and the hope that it cultivates for the downtrodden and the struggling masses.

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